

183hh- Becoming An Immovable Object

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(A Summarised Transcription From A Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Q: What is the middle way between asceticism and sensual indulgence? Is it the practice of enduring (neither giving into or denying) thoughts?

Nm: That's the way to cultivate the middle way.

From the context of thoughts or mental images that appear in people's minds, sensuality would be the acting out of thoughts immediately without reflection, without sense restraint, or any consideration. That's pretty much what defines sensuality.

"Thought and lust are a man's sensuality,
Not the various things in the world;
Thought and lust are a man's sensuality,
The various things just stand there in the world;
But the wise get rid of desire therein." -An.6.63

The nature of thought (mind state) might be sensual, but when it's paired with acceptance, welcoming, and delight in it, there's immediate acting towards it. The opposite way would be, for example, if you see sensuality as a problem and then you try to deny those thoughts. You see that you act out of sensual thoughts and then think that not having those thoughts would be good and so you try to prevent them from arising, which is the other extreme of self-mortification, the ignoble way of self-torture. It's ignoble because it cannot bring about the result you want. Trying to resist thoughts is not bad but denying thoughts requires you to take things further. One thing is resisting thoughts, allowing them to endure, and resisting you acting out of them. Another thing is to think that you mustn't have these thoughts, to begin with, that would be you over-reaching because that's not up to you. That's why giving into those thoughts or trying to deny them, you remain equally ignorant, bound with sensuality and self-mortification, you are bound with the bait that Mara has laid down. So how do you then not go into these extremes?

Sensuality and self-mortification can result in extremes but in themselves, it's relatively subtle in the beginning. You denying thoughts is not exactly extreme, yet it partakes in the direction of self-mortification, it shares the same nature. All of the acts of self-mortification that would come later on in someone's practice, of such a kind, would all be sharing the same principle in common, which is a denial of the arisen thought, "I mustn't have it!", and initially the Buddha was the same when he was trying to find a way out.

There is no end to asceticism, you can always do more, even to the point where the Buddha tried to stop breathing so that he wouldn't have unwholesome thoughts arise, but he realised that that would not work either.

People tend to dismiss EXTREME asceticism or extreme sensuality and think as long as they do not commit to those extremes then they are in the middle. No, if you are either overly accepting your thoughts or denying them, you are not in the middle. The middle way is the way that can discern the arisen thought, not act out of it, and not try to get rid of it. Which means that the mind already needs to have been developed sufficiently enough to allow the thought to endure without jumping into the action on account of it. Therefore sense restraint needs to be developed beforehand, virtue needs to be established because that will give you a certain space to not automatically act out of thoughts.

Patient Endurance Allows For Wisdom.

The beginning of right discernment is being able to allow thoughts to endure without welcoming them. Thoughts arise on their own, that's the whole point, and thinking that you can deny them already implies a wrong view, whereby you think that you are in charge of those thoughts, or that you are responsible for their arising. No, you are responsible for their acceptance. You are responsible for delighting in them and acting out of them. If you don't do these things and thoughts are still there, that's not on you, but the reason why people still want to get rid of those thoughts is because it's unpleasant to allow thoughts to endure without acting out of it. It's easier to act towards sensuality and it's easier to deny. The hardest thing is to allow it to endure and not act out of it, because it can endure for days, and when you're not acting out of it, that whole pressure and emotional charge is there. It's easier to get angry and lustful, just to say yes or no, act and express yourself quickly to deal with the pressurizing thought. It's easier, but again, the only reason you are doing that is because the endurance(manifestation) of the thought is first, which means that no matter how much you try to give in or deny it, you always do it on account of that which you are not in control of, and which bothers you. In other words, all of your efforts to act towards or deny the thought are futile.

If you want to deal with the painfulness of an enduring thought, when you are not acting out of it, you need to allow it to endure so that you can understand it.

There is no wisdom arising on account of sensual behavior or self-mortification (indulgence and denial) because you just lock into a direction and that's your principle of action, i.e if it arises you just say yes yes yes, or no no no, and then you conflate that with the idea of purity which makes you feel extra superior on account of your great determination. And then you will realize that even the unwholesome states that you wanted to abandon, the conceit, ego, pride, get amplified instead of abandoned. So whatever the thought is, whatever the state of mind is, you have to allow it to endure, and just ask yourself, whatever state of mind you are now in, did you create it, did you press an internal button which produced it? No, but because you think it is yours, you try to engage in it or deny it.

The problem is not in those thoughts arising, the problem is in you acting out of it, either towards or against, either way, you are affirming its grip on you, by your attempts to wiggle out of it.

Allowing thoughts to endure without acting out of them, would be the beginning of the middle way. Also, that's exactly what grasping the 'signs of the mind'- *cittanimitta* means in the suttas. Grasping the sign of your mind for what it is, its nature, the way it endures. The reason why people cannot grasp the *cittanimitta*, the prerequisite for the right view, is because they either act toward or deny their mind. So you're either under-doing the restraint or over-doing the restraint, but you are not doing the restraint properly either way.

Q: When you are watching the breath and a lustful thought arises, some tend to think 'I must get rid of this' therefore I must just watch my breath so that I don't have lustful thoughts, and if I can keep watching my breath I will never have lustful thoughts again.

NM: That's like the deer herd that ran on top of the mountain (Mn 25). They are not experiencing any temptation from the bait, for some time, but they are not growing wisdom regarding overcoming the bait altogether, which means when their food on the mountain runs out, or when you can't sustain watching your breath 24/7, something will have to pull you out one way or another, and then you are back to where you were before, because no wisdom was developed, which would have created an elevated ground for you to be on. When the suitable environment, which was allowing you to not engage with the bait disappears, you get trapped once again because your freedom from the bait was only circumstantial.

By the way, there is no problem if you have lustful thoughts when you are breathing and you attend to the breath. You can do that because it is a matter of choice. The problem is when people choose to attend the breath with the view of denying the thought. Not as in 'I will attend my breath and allow these thoughts to endure in the background of my mind because it has arisen on its own, I didn't invite it, I will allow it to endure as long as it wants, I will not give attention to it, I will attend to my breath', but rather one should not think "I will attend to my breath so that this thought is gone, I will do away with it, it doesn't exist!!!!", if you think like that, you are engaged with the thought and your breath is secondary because this lustful thought is now your main concern. Like in the suttas when Mara comes and tries to tempt the Buddha. The Buddha can't chase him away, he can, however, not provide Mara with a basis on which to latch, and that's when Mara leaves him alone. Thoughts of sensuality arise like flies buzzing around you but unless you provide something suitable for them to land on, they will just buzz off elsewhere.

In the suttas, it says that one should sometimes not pay attention to unwholesome thoughts (Mn20), but you shouldn't do that at the expense of denying their presence, which has arisen on its own. And it's because they are present, that you don't give them your attention. I wouldn't have to 'not give you my attention' if you are not here. So if I am instructed to not give you my attention, it means I KNOW that you are here, and for the duration of, or endurance of your presence here, I will not give you my attention, but I will not pretend that you don't exist in the hopes that you will disappear, that's just wishful thinking and you are just denying the presence

of the thing which you had nothing to do with. That's how Mara traps you, affirming or denying is his domain.

Q: Is it about being equanimous regarding a lustful mind state?

Nm: That would be the outcome of cultivating the correct attitude long enough, whereby Mara will leave you alone. The pressure will not be able to overwhelm your mind, but not if you just cultivate sense restraint by itself. That's just the necessary basis to see the middle way, the basis for you to stop denying thoughts/ states of mind, but instead allow them to endure so that you become stronger than those states, so to speak. Through having them endure and not acting out of them, not losing your sense restraint, and not trying to deny that which you are restrained against. In other words, cultivating the middle way will eventually lead to equanimity, immovability, etc.

Q: Those mental states will be less intense.

Nm: Yes, but that's more of the side effect. Your concern should be that 'you are not moved by those states even if they last forever'. As the Buddha said "be like earth, water, fire, air, that are not affected by things that are thrown on them, etc..."(Mn62)

If you want to make that a practice, that is done on the level of the mental states, ask yourself "What mood am I in? How is that mood affecting my action? Am I lashing out? am I binge eating? Am I irritated? Am I seeking sensuality? Am I expressing these things? Am I being moved by these states of mind? If yes, that means I do not see the mind for what it is, I don't see its nature, I am not grasping the sign of the mind correctly. The sign of the mind is the enduring state of mind that you didn't invite and that you shouldn't delight in it, but just see it for what it is, an enduring phenomenon. When you start seeing that, you are already understanding the mind to a greater degree.

You will inevitably start doing this practice wrong, but you have to start somewhere, just don't take your starting place at face value, take it with a pinch of salt, so to speak. Whatever you are doing, even if it makes sense, don't immediately think that you are right, just keep testing to see if it's correct, keep reflecting on just how perturbed you are when lustful thoughts arise. Remember, when you do start you will be starting on your own terms, which is the wrong way to start, but you have no other way than that, but you have to start somehow. You don't have to fabricate your experience to contemplate it but rather, it's more like just finding the state of mind that's already there.

You want to remove this idea that you are 'doing' the observation of the mind and start seeing the mental states as already there. Why are you even able to observe a mind of lust or anger? Because the mind is already that, you find it there already enduring as such. So whether you are doing awareness of mental states or not, doesn't matter, what matters is not losing that peripheral state of mind that's enduring, whether you look at it or not.

Q: What to do when you have a peaceful state of mind?

Nm: You can do the same. Don't be negligent, or distract yourself from it. If it's peaceful, then question it also, "Did I create that peace, do I know where it came from and when it will go?" No, I am subjected to it. It's agreeable and so let me not delight in that agreeability of mind, so that when that changes I will not be affected by it, and then equally when the state of mind is disagreeable, you will not crave against it, which means it's not affecting you much, which means you don't have to be fretting over it, trying to get rid of it. And that's the problem, that it's affecting you, not that the state of mind arose.

Q: The goal then is to not be affected by any state of mind...

Nm: ...And seeing that the state of mind is discerned on the peripheral level, not on the level of your attention. The mind is on the level of sense organs, not sense objects. What you attend is sense objects, sights, sounds, smells, taste, touch, thoughts, but the state of mind is what's peripheral to that. For example, you can't have angry thoughts if the mind is not angry. If you have angry thoughts, then you can know that the state of mind which endures is a state of anger, and at first, it will feel ambiguous because you want to have things clear cut, where you can easily attend to it, but that's the behavior of the untrained mind. Training the mind to the sight of the peripheral image of the mind is what developing cittanimitta is i.e seeing the mind for what it is, without over attending it, without under attending it, and forgetting about it.

Q: If you cannot see it, then you cannot endure it.

Nm: Exactly, not seeing it means that you are either resisting it or indulging it. If you have a view that you shouldn't be enduring the mind, you will never see it, as in if you have the view that you should be denying those thoughts, that represent the state of mind behind them, you will not be able to endure it because your view is to not endure it. Or if you have a state of mind that you habitually act out of, again it's because you cannot endure it. Even if you cannot attend properly in that peripheral manner to your state of mind (*yonisomanasikara*), the only way that you would be able to do so is if you start enduring whatever emotional mood you are in, not acting out of it and not trying to get rid of it.

Sensuality is bad, so don't act out of it, but that doesn't mean that you try and remove the thoughts that are there, because that means you're engaging with it. You need to become immovable regarding that which moves you, not try to get out of the whole situation and try to move that which moves you. That's impossible, because how can you go out and move that which moves you without being moved.

The only way to become immovable/ unaffected is to stop interfering with that which disturbs you and stop being moved by it while it's there. You are moved, by acting out of it or trying to get rid of it. So allowing thoughts/ state of mind to endure, if they are pleasant, then the endurance will be manifested through you NOT acting towards that pleasure, and if it is unpleasant, the endurance will be manifest through you NOT trying to get rid of it. That's the middle way.

